The Younger Set

By ROBERT W. CHAMBERS,

Author of "The Fighting Chance," Etc.

Chapter 28

RUTHVEN was after his divorce. That was what it all meant. His first check on the long trail came with the stupefying news of Gerald's runaway marriage to the young girl he was laying his own plans to marry some day in the future, and at first the news staggered him, leaving him apparently no immediate incentive for securing his freedom.

But Ruthven instantly began to realize that what he had lost he might not have lost had he been free to shoulder aside the young fellow who had forestalled him. The chance had passed—that particular chance. But he'd never again allow himself to be caught in a position where such a chance could pass him by because he was not legally free to at least make the effort to seize it.

Fear in his soul had kept him from blazoning his wife's infirmity to the world as cause for an action against her, but he remembered Neergard's impudent cruise with her on the Niobrara, and he had temporarily settled on that as a means to extort revenue, not intending such an action should ever come to trial. And then he learned that Neergard had gone to pieces. That was the second check.

Ruthven needed money. He needed it because he meant to put the ocean between himself and Selwyn before commencing any suit, whatever ground he might choose for entering such a suit. He required capital on which to live abroad during the proceedings if that could be legally arranged. And meanwhile, preliminary to any plan of campaign, he desired to know where his wife was and what might be her actual physical and mental condition.

But Ruthven was totally unprepared for the report brought him by a private agency to the effect that Mrs. Ruthven was apparently in perfect health, living in the country, maintaining a villa and staff of servants; that she might be seen driving a perfectly appointed Cossack sleigh any day with a groom on the rumble and a companion beside her; that she seemed to be perfectly sane, healthy in body and mind, comfortable, happy and enjoying life under the protection of a certain Captain Selwyn, who paid all her bills and at certain times was seen entering or leaving her house at Edgewater.

Excited, incredulous, but hoping for the worst, Ruthven had posted off to his attorneys. To them he naively confessed his desire to be rid of Alixe. He reported her misconduct with Neergard—which he knew was a lie—her pretense of mental prostration, her disappearance and his last interview with Selwyn in the card room. He also gave a vivid description of that gentleman's disgusting behavior and his threats of violence during that interview.

To all of which his attorneys listened very attentively, bade him have no fear of his life, requested him to make several affidavits and leave the rest to them for the present.

Which he did, without hearing from them until Mr. Hallam telegraphed him to come to Edgewater if he had nothing better to do.

Mr. Hallam was a very busy, very sanguine, very impetuous young man, and when he met Ruthven at the Edgewater station he told him promptly that he had the best case on earth; that he, Hallam, was going to New York on the next train, now almost due, and that Ruthven had better drive over and see for himself how gayly his wife maintained her household, for the Cossack sleigh, with its gray crimson tchug, had but just returned from the usual afternoon spin, and the young chatelaine of Willow Villa was now on the snow covered lawn, romping with the coachman's huge white wolfhound. Ruthven drove to the villa.

There were clumps of evergreens about, tall cedars, a bit of bushy foreland and a stretch of snow. And across this open space of snow a young girl was moving, followed by a white wolfhound. Once she paused, hesitated, looked cautiously around her. Ruthven, hiding behind a bush, saw her thrust her arm into a low evergreen shrub and draw out a shining object that glittered like glass. Then she started toward the house again.

At first Ruthven thought she was his wife. Then he was not sure, and he cast his cigar away and followed, slinking forward among the evergreens. But the youthful, fur clad figure kept straight on to the veranda of the house, and Ruthven, curious and determined to find out whether it was Alixe or not, left the semi-shelter of the evergreens and crossed the open space just as the woman's figure disappeared around an angle of the veranda.

Vexed, determined not to return without some definite discovery, Ruthven stepped upon the veranda. Just around the angle of the porch he heard a door opening, and he hurried forward, impatient and absolutely unafraid, anxious to get one good look at his wife and be off.

But when he turned the angle of the porch there was no one there. Only an open door confronted him, with a big, mild eyed wolfhound standing in the doorway looking steadily up at him.

Ruthven glanced somewhat dubiously at the dog; then as the animal made no offensive movement he craned his fleshy neck striving to see inside the house.

He did see—nothing very much, only the same young girl, still in her furs, emerging from an inner room, her arms full of dolls.

In his eagerness to see more Ruthven pushed past the great white dog, who withdrew his head disdainfully from the unceremonious contact, but quietly followed Ruthven into the house, standing beside him, watching him out of great, limpid, deerlike eyes.

But Ruthven no longer heeded the dog. His amused and slightly sneering gaze was fastened on the girl in furs who had entered what appeared to be a living room to the right and now, down on her knees beside a couch, smiling and talking confidentially and quite happily to herself, was placing her dolls against the wall.

Then the great white dog growled very low, and the girl in the fur jacket looked around and up quickly.

Alixe! He realized it as she caught his pale eyes fixed on her, and she stared, sprang to her feet, still staring. Then into her eyes leaped terror, the living horror of recognition distorting her face. And as she saw he meant to speak she recoiled, shrinking away, turning in her fright like a hunted thing. The strange doll in her hand glittered. It was a revolver wrapped in a red rag.

"W-what's the matter?" he stammered, stepping forward, fearful of the weapon she clutched.

At the sound of his voice she screamed

But at the sound of his voice she screamed, crept back closer against the wall, screamed again, pushing the shining muzzle of the weapon deep into her fur jacket above her breast.

"F-for God's sake," he gasped, "don't fire—don't"—

She closed both eyes and pulled the trigger. Something knocked her flat against the wall, but she heard no sound of a report, and she pulled the trigger again and felt another blow.

The second blow must have knocked her down, for she found herself rising to her knees, reaching for the table to aid her. But her hand was all red and slippery. She looked at it stupidly, fell forward, rose again, with the acrid smell of smoke choking her and her pretty fur jacket all soaked with the warm, wet stuff which now stained both hands.

Then she got to her knees once more, groped in the rushing darkness and swayed forward, falling loosely and flat. And this time she did not try to rise.

It was her way. It had always been her way out of trouble—the quickest, easiest escape from what she did not choose to endure.

As for the man, they finally contrived to drag the dog from him and lift him to the couch, where he lay twitching among the dolls for awhile, then stopped twitching.

Later in the night men came with lanterns, who carried him away. A doctor said that there was the usual chance for partial recovery. But it was the last excitement he could ever venture to indulge in.

Chapter 29

NINE days is the period of time allotted the human mind in which to wonder at anything. In New York the limit is much less. No tragedy can hold the boards as long as that where the bill must be renewed three times a day to hold even the passing attention of those who themselves are eternal understudies in the continuous metropolitan performance.

As for Selwyn, a few people noticed his presence at the funeral. But even that episode was forgotten before he left the city six hours later under an invitation from Washington which admitted of no delay on the score of private business or of personal perplexity, for the summons was peremptory and his obedience so immediate that a telegram to Austin comprised and concluded the entire ceremony of his leave taking.

Later he wrote a great many letters to Eileen Erroll, not one of which he ever sent. But the formality of his silence was no mystery to her, and her response was silence as profound as the stillness in her soul. But deep into her young heart something new had been born.

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In April the armored ships left the southern drill ground and began to move northward. A destroyer took Selwyn across to the great fortress inside the Virginia capes and left him there. During his stay there was almost constant firing. Later he continued northward as far as Washington, but it was not until June that he telegraphed Austin:

Government satisfied. Appropriation certain next session. Am on my way to New York.

Austin, in his house, which was now dismantled for the summer, telephoned Nina at Silverside that he had been detained and might not be able to grace the festivities which were to consist of a neighborhood dinner to the younger set in honor of Mrs. Gerald. But he said nothing about Selwyn, and Nina did not suspect that her brother's arrival in New York had anything to do with Austin's detention.

As Selwyn came leisurely up the front steps Austin, awaiting him feverishly, hastened to smooth the florid jocose mask over his features and walked into the room, big hand extended, large, bantering voice undisturbed by the tremor of a welcome which filled his heart and came near filling his eyes:

"So you've stuck the poor old government at last, have you? Took 'em all in—forts, fleet and the marine cavalry?"

"Sure thing," said Selwyn, laughing in the crushing grasp of the big fist. "How are you, Austin? Everybody's in the country, I suppose," glancing around at the linen shrouded furniture. "How is Nina? And the kids? Good business? And Eileen?"

"She's all right," said Austin. "Gad! She's really a superb specimen this summer. Where's your luggage? Oh, is it all here? Enough, I mean, for us to catch a train for Silverside this afternoon?"

"Has Nina any room for me?" asked Selwyn.

"Room! Certainly! I didn't tell her you were coming, because if you hadn't the kids would have been horribly disappointed. She and Eileen are giving a shindy for Gladys—that's Gerald's new acquisition, you know. So if you don't mind butting into a baby show we'll run down. It's only the younger bunch from Hitherwood House and Brookminster. What do you say, Phil?"

Selwyn said that he would go, hesitating before consenting. A curious feeling of age and grayness had suddenly come over him, a hint of fatigue, of consciousness that much of life lay behind him.

So Austin went to the telephone and called up his house at Silverside, saying that he'd be down that evening with a guest.

Nina got the message just as she had arranged her tables, but woman is born to sorrow and heiress to all the unlooked for idiocies of man.

"Dear," she said to Eileen, the tears of uxorial vexation drying unshed in her pretty eyes, "Austin has thought fit to seize upon this moment to bring a man down to dinner. So if you are dressed would you kindly see that the tables are rearranged and then telephone somebody to fill in—two girls, you know? The oldest Craig girl might do for one. Beg her mother to let her come."

"Whom is Austin bringing?" Eileen asked.

"He didn't say. Can't you think of a second girl to get? Isn't it vexing? Of course there's nobody left—nobody ever fills in in the country. Do you know, I'll be driven into letting Drina sit up with us for sheer lack of material. I suppose the little imp will have a fit if I suggest it and probably perish of indigestion tomorrow."

Eileen laughed. "Oh, Nina, do let Drina come this once! It can't hurt her."

And so it happened that, among the jolly throng which clustered around the little candle lighted tables in the dining room at Silverside, Drina in ecstasy, curly hair just above the nape of her slim white neck and cheeks like pink fire, sat between Boots and a vacant chair reserved for her tardy father.

For Nina had waited as long as she dared. Then Boots had been summoned to take in Drina and the youthful Craig girl, and, as there were to have been six at a table, at that particular table sat Boots decorously facing Eileen, with the two children on either hand and two empty chairs flanking Eileen.

At dinner Drina and the younger Craig maiden also appeared to be bent upon self destruction, and Boots' eyes opened wider and wider in sheer amazement at the capacity of woman in embryo for rations sufficient to maintain a small garrison.

"There'll be a couple of reports," he said to himself, with a shudder, "like Selwyn's chaosite, and then there'll be no more Drina and Daisy. Hello!" He broke off, astonished. "Well, upon my word of words! Phil Selwyn, or I'm a broker!"

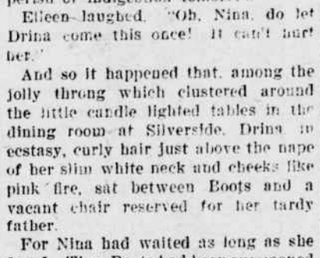
"Phil!" exclaimed Nina. "Oh, Austin, and you never told us!"

"Train was late, as usual," observed Austin. "Philip and I don't mean to butt into this very grand function—Hello, Gerald! Hello, Gladys! Where's our obscure corner below the salt, Nina? Oh, over there!"

Selwyn had already caught sight of the table destined for him. A deeper color crept across his bronzed face as he stepped forward, and his firm hand closed over the slim hand offered.

For a moment neither spoke. She could not. He dared not.

Then Drina caught his hands, and Eileen's loosened in his clasp and fell



For a moment neither spoke.

away as the child said distinctly: "I'll kiss you after dinner. It can't be done here, can it, Eileen?"

Selwyn, beside Eileen, had ventured on the formalities, his voice unsteady and not yet his own.

Her loveliness had been a memory. He had supposed he realized it to himself, but the superb fresh beauty of the girl dazed him. There was a strange new radiancy, a living brightness, to her that seemed almost unreal. Exquisitely unreal her voice, too, and the slightly bent head, crowned with the splendor of her hair, and the slowly raised eyes, two deep blue miracles tinged with the hues of paradise.

"Are you remaining to smoke?" asked Eileen as Selwyn took her to the doorway after dinner. "Because if you are not I'll wait for you."

"On the lawn out there—farther out, in the starlight," he whispered, his voice broke, "my darling"—

She bent her head, passing slowly before him, turned, looked back, her answer in her eyes, her lips, in every limb, every line and contour of her, as she stood a moment looking back.

Austin and Boots were talking volubly when he returned to the tables now veiled in a fine haze of aromatic smoke. Gerald stuck close to him, happy, excited, shy by turns. Others came up on every side—young, frank, confident fellows, nice in bearing, of good speech and manner.

And outside waited their pretty partners of the younger set, gossiping in hall, on stairs and veranda in garrulous bevies, all filmy silks and laces and bright eyed expectancy.

The long windows were open to the veranda. Selwyn, with his arm through Gerald's, walked to the railing and looked out across the fragrant starlit waste. And very far away they heard the sea intoning the hymn of the four winds.

Then the elder man withdrew his arm and stood apart for awhile. A little later he descended to the lawn, crossed it and walked straight out into the waste.

The song of the sea was rising now. In the strange little forest below, deep among the trees, elfin lights broke out

He halted to listen.

across the unseen Briar Water, then vanished. He halted to listen. He looked long and steadily into the darkness around him. Suddenly he saw her—a pale blur in the dusk.

"Eileen?"

"Is it you, Philip?"

She stood waiting as he came up through the purple gloom of the moorland, the stars' brilliancy silvering her—waiting—yielding in pallid silence to his arms, crushed in them, looking into his eyes, dumb, wordless.

Then slowly the pale sacrament changed as the wild rose tint crept into her face. Her arms clung to his shoulders, higher, tightened around his neck. And from her lips she gave into his keeping soul and body, guiltless as God gave it, to have and to hold beyond such incidents as death and the eternity that no man clings to save in the arms of such as she.

THE END.

Snowball Showers.

More than one explorer in cold climates has noted the curious phenomenon of a "snowball shower." The balls, it is true, are not very big, the average being about the size of a hen's egg, but they are true snowballs for all that—compressed globes of snow, not little lumps of ice or hail. A fall of the kind occurred in north London in March, 1859, and at the time it was observed that the balls seemed five times as dense and compressed as ordinary snow and in no way to be told from the usual handmade missiles. They had fallen during the night and were strewn many layers thick over a very large area. No cause—except a doubtful electrical one—can be ascribed for the strange phenomenon, and mountaineers are apt to discredit the stories of snowball showers told them by the old guides till suddenly in the midst of an ordinary storm they find themselves assailed as though by myriads of mischievous schoolboys.—London Standard.

Barrie's Critic.

J. M. Barrie some years ago was persuaded to take the chair at a Burns celebration in Scotland. He was extremely silent and stole away at the earliest opportunity. Next week appeared in the National Observer a humorous article entitled "Mr. Barrie In the Chair," in which Mr. Barrie's lack of social tact was held up to ridicule. Many people thought the writer had gone too far and protested. But the author of the article was Mr. Barrie himself.

Directory of Highland County

The following is a brief synopsis of the County of Highland, which may be useful to our readers from time to time.

Circuit Court meets the fourth Tuesday in April, July 10th, and Nov. 10th. Judge—Geo K. Anderson, Clifton Forge. Clerk—J. Clif Matheny.

Supervisors—A. C. Judy, W. H. Vance, G. Lee Chew. They meet first Monday of the month.

Commonwealth Attorney—Edwin B. Jones.

Treasurer—J. A. Jones.

Surveyor—H. A. Slaven.

Superintendent of Poor—L. B. Waybright.

Superintendent of Schools—J. L. Jones.

Commissioner of Revenue—J. A. Whitelaw.

Population, 1900: white, 5,269; colored, 378.

Number of voters—white; 1,196; colored, 52.

Area—Acres, 280,572; sq. miles, 438.

Like a Streak.

"Was his auto going so very fast?"

"Your honor, it was going so fast that the bulldog on the seat beside him looked like a dachshund.—Houston Post.